Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

John Yamrus and His Noir Memoir RMA

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, February 20th, 2019

John Yamrus is the author of 25 books of poetry, two novels, a children's book, and two memoirs, the highly acclaimed MemoryLane *and the just-published* RMA. *I caught up with him recently through the miracle of technology.*

Here are the juicy bits of our conversation:

Eileen Murphy (EM): *You wrote your first memoir,* Memory Lane, *last year, recalling your childhood in a coal mining town. Now you've followed up with your new memoir,* RMA. *What's the difference between* Memory Lane *and* RMA—*is* RMA *a sequel?*

John Yamrus (JY): Not a sequel in any sense of the word…in fact, even though i had been asked by many people (not the least is my publisher) to follow up MEMORY LANE, i couldn't bring myself to it, mostly because i didn't just want to write *more of the same.* i really fought against doing it just to do it. i wanted to do it (at least a part of me did), but i didn't know how to start. and then one day i wrote that first line, "i was the loneliest person i ever knew," and i was off to the races!

EM: *The cover and inside pages of* RMA *are styled to resemble a high school yearbook. What is the yearbook motif in* RMA *all about? What does "RMA" stand for?*

JY: well, i wanted the title to kind of echo MEMORY LANE, but i didn't know how to tie it in…until i wrote the scene in RMA where they're looking thru the yearbook and it all just came together for me…and RMA was really a no-brainer for me…it's how kids (when i was young) used to sign yearbooks…it stands for "remember me always"…not many people get the reference, but i really and truly don't care.

EM: *You touch on some heavy subjects in* RMA*—loss, death, loneliness ("I was the loneliest person I ever knew"). How did you experience writing* RMA*? Was it difficult, even painful?*

JY: it wasn't difficult…but, it WAS painful. most things that make any kind of a lasting impression do so because they hurt…even GOOD memories seem to hurt a little bit, just because they're lost and gone.

EM: *You make reference in* RMA *to writers Proust, Hughes, Kerouac, and many more. Which writers influenced you the most?*

JY: now, THAT'S a really loaded question that i don't think i have the time to answer. i wouldn't even know where to begin…and i don't think that *writers* had the biggest influence on my writing…in general, the biggest influence on my work has been (and still is) jazz…and in particular Miles Davis. i mean, HE'S THE ONE who taught me about silence…and brevity…that writing's not really about what you say…it's really mostly about what you DON'T say. it's about knowing what to leave out as much as what to put in. it's about choices. writing and jazz and painting and life…it's all about the choices you make. but, if i were forced to name some writers who influenced me (beyond the obvious), i think i'd also mention people like Nelson Algren and Raymond Chandler…even my favorite actors are people who knew the power of silence…and attitude…people like Bogart and Robert Mitchum…ESPECIALLY Robert Mitchum, whose entire career and appeal was summed up in what is without a doubt my favorite line from my favorite Robert Mitchum movie, when he said with all the cool in the world: "Baby, I don't care."

EM: *What books do you recommend people read?*

JY: the ones that get you deep. the ones you come back to time and again…for me they're odd books…books that people wouldn't necessarily see as "literary" classics, in the strict sense of the word…THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM…THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE…Jim Thompson's THE KILLER INSIDE ME…anything by Zola…a lot of Steinbeck…and Herman Wouk…i mean, where do you start? and how do you ever stop?

EM: *How does it feel to be a "memoirist" when you were known as a poet for so many years?*

JY: i guess we're getting back to talking about RMA and even MEMORY LANE again…it's funny…i spent my whole "career" (if you want to call it that) trying to dodge all the labels that were put on me…i still cringe and maybe even die a little bit inside every time someone tries to call me a poet…and now, with these last two books, what are they gonna call me? what kind of a label are they gonna try and hang around my neck? i don't know. it's funny…you want to be a writer because you like being alone, but to be a "success" at it you've got to also embrace the spotlight. the way i see it, i'm still a work in progress…i don't know what the hell i am…i just know that even at 67 years old i still gotta come down here day after day and shut the door and do whatever it is i do.

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